UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/1995/32
7 April 1995

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Third session
11-28 April 1995
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*

GENERAL DISCUSSION ON PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21, FOCUSING ON THE CROSS-SECTORAL COMPONENTS OF AGENDA 21 AND THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Letter dated 18 March 1995 from the Permanent Representatives of Belgium and Costa Rica to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

We have the honour to transmit to you a brief summary report of the Workshop on Indicators of Sustainable Development for Decision-Making held in Ghent, Belgium, from 9 to 11 January 1995 (see annex).

This report seeks to sum up the main findings and conclusions reached by the participants at this Workshop, which was organized by the Belgian and Costa Rican Governments, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE), and included in the list of meetings relevant to the programme of work of the Commission on Sustainable Development in 1994-1995. We would be grateful if this letter together with its annex could be made available to the Commission as an official document.

The record of the Workshop, including the debate with non-governmental organizations and the compilation of full texts provided for the Workshop, will

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be presented at the third session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (11-28 April 1995).

(Signed) M. Alex REYN
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Permanent Representative
(Belgium)

(Signed) Fernando BERROCAL
Ambassador and
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ANNEX

Workshop on Indicators of Sustainable Development for Decision-Making

(Ghent, 9-11 January 1995)

I MAIN FINDINGS OF THE WORKSHOP

The Belgian and Costa Rican Governments, UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), and SCOPE (the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment) have decided to organise this Workshop in the recognition that there is a need to develop commonly accepted indicators of sustainable development to provide solid bases for decision-making at all levels and to contribute to a self-regulating sustainability of integrated environment and socio-economic systems. What is lacking is a global process to arrive at a common approach and consensus on the technical validity, comparability and political acceptability of indicator use.

This growing need for sustainable development indicators has been widely expressed by policy and decision-makers in national governments, business and industry, and by NGOs. Chapter 40 of Agenda 21 recognizes this need, stating that commonly used indicators such as GNP and measures of resource and pollution flows do not provide adequate indications of sustainability. Non-governmental organizations are called upon to develop the concept of indicators (Ch. 40.6), to cooperate with UN bodies in using a suitable set of sustainable development indicators and in harmonizing the development of indicators at all levels (Ch.40.7).

In its first session after the UNCED Conference, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) called for indicators that would provide a basis for meaningful assessment of progress towards sustainable development, for possible integration into its national reporting and analytical processes (CSD Reports, 1993, 1994).

Responding to this high demand, governmental and non-governmental organizations on all levels have begun using, developing or planning to develop indicators of sustainable development. Many organizations work in this area as part of national sustainability plans and programs or respond to their own needs in policy and decision-making, while other organizations, particularly UNSTAT and UNEP, respond to their mandates or specific UN requests. A great deal of significant work in this area has been undertaken by national and international organizations, and by governments.

The purpose of the Workshop was to contribute to the development of environmental, social and economic indicators for the implementation of Agenda 21 as a larger process. It will thus review indicators on the three principal aspects of sustainability and discuss the links between them. In order to enlighten the discussions, the first paper of this brochure, entitled "The Role of Indicators in Decision-Making," was jointly prepared by UNEP and the UN Division for

Sustainable Development, Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development (DPCSD).

Environmental components of sustainable development are among the most difficult to adequately reflect in national-level indicators and, consequently, the area of greatest need. Therefore, a second discussion paper focused on environmental indicators, entitled "Environmental Indicators: A Systematic Approach to Measuring and Reporting on the Environment in the Context of Sustainable Development", was prepared for this Workshop by the Project on Indicators of Sustainable Development of the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE). SCOPE aims to contribute to the implementation of Agenda 21 by developing recommendations for highly aggregated indicators on the macro-level that are policy relevant, scientifically valid, and technically achievable.

The Workshop brought together about 50 participants, aiming at a balanced representation among countries and among information producers and users of national-level sustainability indicators (particularly high-level policy-makers in national governments). The Workshop did not target environmental policy-makers alone, but also, and perhaps more importantly, those in the field of social and economic development. Twenty representatives of the 13 Governments invited by Belgium have taken part in the discussions, 13 of them being from non-OECD countries and 7 from OECD countries. Eleven representatives from eight intergovernmental organizations also participated. The scientific community was represented by eight members of SCOPE and the NGO community by the New Economics Foundation and the IUCN Eastern African Regional Office. Belgium, as a host country, was represented by delegates from its National and Regional Commissions on Sustainable Development. This diverse combination of participants allowed a stimulating exchange between a sample of decision-makers from national governments who will be the ultimate users of indicators, experts who are designing indicators, and the organisations who will need to implement work programmes in this area.

II CONCLUSIONS

The Workshop reaches the following conclusions :

1. The usefulness of Indicators of Sustainable Development (ISDs) as mentioned in Agenda 21 has been confirmed by the Workshop. The potential uses of ISDs include alerting decision-makers to priority issues, guiding policy formulation, simplifying and improving communication, and fostering a common understanding of key trends with a view to initiating necessary national action. The primary focus and purpose of ISDs as discussed in this Workshop is to facilitate decision-making at the national level. They should be considered as useful tools that countries can decide to use (or not) as

sources of information on progress towards their own targets for sustainable development.

2. The economic, social, environmental and institutional aspects of sustainable development should be equally emphasized in the framework for indicators of sustainable development and the development of a core set of indicators be a balanced and truly global effort.

3. Conceptual frameworks, such as the pressure-state-response framework, are recognized as potentially useful to organize and guide ISD development. However, the Workshop also found a need to try out such frameworks so as to gain greater experience with them, and to emphasize that nations may interpret them flexibly and take into account the different development levels of individual nations.

4. Similarly, the need for aggregation has been recognized in order to avoid being lost in a sea of information. More experience, and extensive international consultation to share that experience, are needed.

5. The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) should consider making available to Governments the methodology for a core set of indicators in the form of a set of methodology sheets. Such a core set would constitute a menu from which countries could select the indicators that they may use in their national policies, according to their own problems, priorities and targets. Use of a common methodology will facilitate international compilation. It will also guide data collection. Practice (e.g., in the European Union) has shown that harmonization of methodology at a later stage is a very time-consuming and cumbersome activity.

6. More experience should be gained with the use of the indicators included in the core set. It was recommended that they be tested in some countries or regions on a voluntary basis and, where necessary, adjusted.

7. It is evident that the core set must be seen as a flexible, evolving tool. It may change according to further experience gained. The selection of indicators of the core set may vary from country to country and from region to region. Besides, new indicators may need to be included, e.g., following implementation of international agreements and based on countries' experiences.

8. Indicators, as used in national policies, may be used in national reports to the CSD and other intergovernmental bodies. This may simplify the reporting burden that is perceived as heavy and sometimes duplicative. The progress made towards national targets is what should receive attention.

9. The Workshop stressed the importance of and need for capacity-building programmes related to the introduction of indicators, covering the whole field from data collection to use in policy processes.

10. National statistical services and other appropriate institutions and the UN Statistical Division (UNSTAT) should in routine data collection begin to include data series needed to calculate ISDs and contribute to research, development and harmonization of appropriate indicators. It was recognised that some indicators will require new data. The Statistical Commission of the UN is urged to support this work by approving a first international survey of environmental indicators at its forthcoming session in February/March 1995.

11. The workshop urged the participating UN Agencies (DPCSD, UNEP, UNDP, UNSTAT) to continue their cooperative and synergistic work in support of the development and use of ISDs.

12. Participants at the Workshop recognized that the indicators proposed so far are not yet adequate measures of long-term sustainability. The scientific community, including the SCOPE project on ISDs, should focus their efforts on improved indicators of sustainability which include the integration of and linkages among economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions of sustainability, and the approaches to aggregation of indicators into policy-relevant indices.

13. The Workshop participants invited the Governments of Belgium and Costa Rica to present the results of the Workshop to the Third Session of the CSD and to disseminate them widely.

14. The participants thanked the Governments of Belgium and Costa Rica, the United Nations Environment Programme and SCOPE for the excellent arrangements made for the conference and the warm hospitality extended to them.